SIDEBAR

A Cultural Bridge in Massachusetts Cambodian Outreach Program

In his office at Merrimack Valley Legal Services in Lowell, Massachusetts, Samnung Mam has no mementos on the walls from Cambodia, the land where he was born. He left in 1982, escaping with his family by walking through the jungle in the dead of night after years of punishing strife, starvation and forced farm labor under the brutal Khmer Rouge regime and the Vietnamese invaders who succeeded them. "The life? It was like in hell," he says of those years. "A lot of people were killed at that time. Very painful."

And he has nothing that speaks of his years in Thailand, where he lived in a hut of thatch and bamboo on a plot of land with 75,000 other people, stuck in a displaced persons camp near the border for ten years. "We lived day by day, week by week. We received rice and salt. People had nothing to do, no income, no work, just wait," he said. Finally, in 1993, Mam and his family, including his wife and three children, were granted admission to the U.S.

Samnung Mam, Director of the Cambodian Outreach Project at Merrimack Valley Legal Services.

"I did not bring anything. Just bare feet, just nothing. From the camp, I have nothing. No money to buy; nothing," he says. Cambodia and Thailand are part of an internal landscape now, memories and dreams.

As the director of the Cambodian Outreach Project at the Merrimack program, Mam fills his office with something especially valuable: knowledge of the language, culture, psyche and hearts of the Cambodian people who now populate this New England town. Mam also has an understanding of the American legal system.

"I am a bridge between the Cambodian community and the mainstream, to make them feel comfortable with the legal system, when they never trusted before, " he says. "If you don't know the Cambodian culture, it's hard to see through, to see the heart. For the Cambodian, it's hard to trust. But we have to trust. I tell them, justice is justice. It's hard to convince people to believe that."

Merrimack Valley Legal Services, which serves 50 cities and towns, took on the Cambodian Outreach Project in 2001, says Ken MacIver, Merrimack's Executive Director. The program started at Greater Boston Legal Services before being shifted to Merrimack. This office has 20 staff members, including 10 attorneys, he notes. The Cambodian Outreach Project has an approximate budget of $75,000, with two-thirds supplied by foundation grants, and one-third LSC funds. In addition to Mam, the project includes staff attorney participation, and is integrated into the rest of the Lowell office for provision of specialist services.

In many respects, the need in Lowell was obvious. The city is second only to Long Beach, California, in the number of Cambodian residents—now reaching 20,000. As twenty percent of the town's population, Cambodians are the largest minority in Lowell, and yet are culturally isolated. Like Mam, most Cambodians or their parents experienced the horrors of the Khmer Rouge killing fields, watched relatives disappear and others waste away from lack of food or medication. Many, including Mam, were brought to the U.S. as "parolees," a special immigration status granted for urgent humanitarian reasons and that allows them to work lawfully upon arrival. Many were resettled here by Catholic charities, even though the most are Buddhist.

Mam did not originally arrive in Lowell. He was resettled in North Carolina in 1993 with a sponsor in the military, and began working in a factory. "I found myself very lonely," says Mam. "Americans were helpful to me. But there was nobody around that had the same culture, the same language, the same food." He had a friend in Lowell, and moved. "I was excited to be here. We have Cambodian people, Cambodian markets, Cambodian food."

But they didn't have legal services. Even today, there are only two Cambodian lawyers in the state of Massachusetts, says MacIver, adding "and they are not doing legal services."

Mam also recognized a need for legal services. At first, he pursued a dream that had been robbed from him in Cambodia, where his college studies in pharmacy were cancelled abruptly and universities shut down. He went back to school, working along the way at a health center. "But I found the law was a problem," says Mam. "I was a 'parolee' from a border camp in Thailand, but my status was in limbo. I didn't know what to do. I saw a lot of problems in the community. I was frustrated. So I decided to help my community." He entered law school and signed on with the new legal services project.

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> **—Ken MacIver, Executive Director of Merrimack Valley Legal Services**

According to MacIver, his participation is critical to the success of the project which represents clients on basic legal needs such as housing, benefits, elder law, family law, and domestic violence. After a community needs assessment listed education issues as an area of concern, the Lowell office added an education lawyer to the overall staff, says MacIver.

"What distinguished the older Cambodian community is that it

CHRISTINE WAYNE

had no concept of a system of justice, no concept about rights and courts. The idea of a courthouse was a place where you go to get executed. It was a huge cultural barrier," says MacIver. "The myth might be that Cambodians are similar to other Southeast Asians. Which is not true. They have their own set of circumstances, which are terrible. We've done a lot of work on cultural competency."

Mam, now a law school graduate, prepares brochures in the Khmer language and coordinates education and outreach programs with the other Cambodian service groups. He translates for clients and attorneys, often advising clients on administrative matters. Sometimes, as with a woman who has fallen behind on her rent because she is not receiving child custody payments, he tries to find social service agencies to help, while the lawyer negotiates with the landlord. He hosts a weekly radio show discussing legal topics.

But most of all, Mam is a "cultural broker," Trang Nguyen, a staff attorney, wrote in the Journal of Poverty Law and Policy in 2003. "Far more than just translating, his work as an interpreter served as a cultural bridge to the client, enabling the project team to provide high-quality legal representation."

Mam addresses sticky points, sometimes subtlety. "It's my way to explain both sides. The Cambodians do not speak too much. But they hope someone will help them. I say to them, 'if you don't tell them, you cannot expect someone to come and solve it,'" says Mam. "Others look at the Cambodians and say, 'no one is complaining.' The other side says, 'they have no problem, because they did not say anything.' But there are a lot of problems."

This level of social and cultural negotiation affects every aspect of the client-attorney relationship. When the clients come into the office, the attorney, in a gesture of friendliness, will shake hands, says Mam. But instead of feeling welcomed, Cambodian clients feel uncomfortable. "In our culture, we do not shake the hand, especially a man does not shake the hand of a woman," he says.

He continues. "When we talk, we don't look at a face. For us, when you look at a face, it's a challenge. So we don't look at a face. It doesn't mean that it's a lie. It means I don't want to challenge you. We look around. I have to tell the client, you have to look at the lawyer. I tell the lawyer, looking straight to their eyes, just makes them nervous," said Mam.

Gender issues are especially tricky, none worse than when domestic violence is involved. Violence against women is one of the most common victimizations experienced by immigrants, note authors Edna Erez and Carolyn Copps Hartley, in the Western Criminology Review. Merrimack has a special program for victims of family violence, but it is often difficult for Cambodian women to describe the situation. "The husband will say, 'it's your fault,' and they believe it," says Mam. Knowing that it is more difficult for a Cambodian woman to discuss the topic in front of a man, Mam sometimes excuses himself from the room.

"The more the attorney knows of our culture, they are more comfortable, friendlier and relaxed," he says.

As a result of the in-depth attention paid to cross-cultural experience, the Cambodian Outreach Project has blossomed. "At first, the Cambodians don't know where to go. When they feel comfortable, they tell about the legal system and that we try to help people. When they get something that they want, they try to spread the word out. It's good," says Mam. "Here in a new system, we are learning. We can only solve our problems together."—*C.C.*

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students who had never been in a school room before. They are just teaching about what it means to be a student. These are unique issues," she said. The program represents Hmong clients on issues ranging from housing to domestic violence, with a special emphasis on family reunification, a SMRLS priority.

The stress and strain that can accompany resettlement may touch down in a legal issue. In Seattle, the Namo family, originally from Ethiopia, encountered problems with benefits that many native born also face. But their unfamiliarity with the language and system causes additional turmoil. After living in a refugee camp in Kenya, the family of 11 moved to Washington, where the father's adult daughter, Rahima Robele lived. "It is very different for them," explained Rahima Robele. "They are so new."

The problem arose when the Namo family went to collect their monthly benefits, which are distributed electronically, and the account was wiped clean. The funds, essential to the Namo family, are withdrawn by a debit card from an ATM. They depended on the monies for food, rent, utilities, clothes and other necessities. But, the state refused to reissue the funds.

57% increase in immigrant population from 1990 to 2000

17% immigrant population living in poverty

11.2% non-immigrant population living in poverty

SOURCE: 2000 Census / U.S. Census Bureau

"My father was very upset," said Robele. Her father speaks no English. "He said, 'Who stole our money?' He went to the police and they didn't follow up. He was very upset about that. He said, 'What kind of country is that? What do they treat us like this?'"

Through a social worker's referral, they found the Northwest Justice Project, an LSC grantee, where law students from the University of Washington help immigrants as part of the Refugee and Immigrant Advocacy Project, a clinical program. Under the guidance of Gillian Dutton, six law students each year represent clients and undertake research projects, such as writing a booklet to help community workers understand how disabled or elderly immigrants can apply for citizenship, even if post-traumatic stress, Alzheimer's or other medical conditions prevent them from learning English.

Law student Bobbie Edmiston was assigned the Namo case. "The family had never used a credit card or a computer or an ATM or had a piece of plastic as currency. Their daughter always went with them. In this case, a card was issued by the department one day, and the funds were withdrawn immediately from a half-dozen ATMs. A detective said the pattern was consistent with fraud," said Edmiston, who worked with an interpreter and conducted an administrative hearing for the clients. A judge ruled that the social services department incorrectly issued an electronic benefits card to an

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